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I have been a devoted reader of Anne Carson for several years now, and when I saw her novel *Autobiography of Red* in a bookstore last spring, I bought it immediately. I won't say I didn't even open the book first—I did—and it looked beautiful. Most of the book is written in alternating long and short lines spaced commodiously on the page; not so much "verse" in any strict metrical sense, more like broken up, though poetic, prose:

> It was raining on his face. He forgot for a moment that he was a brokenheart
> then he remembered. Sick lurch
> downward to Geryon trapped in his own bad apple. Each morning a shock
> to return to the cut soul.

This form, and the book's tone, seemed to give off a feeling of tenderness, almost like being rocked. I left the bookstore and went to the nearest café to drink espresso and read, as that is what I do with books I am preparing to love.

Anne Carson is a professor of classics as well as a poet, and her books are a fine marriage of these talents. But what makes them particularly interesting to me is a third obsession, her study of the longing for, and loss of, romantic love. I say "study" deliberately, as this is a subject to which she brings the scholar's passion for knowledge. There is a resemblance, she says, between "the way Eros acts in the mind of a lover and the way knowing acts in the mind of a thinker. . . . I would like to grasp why it is that these two activities, falling in love and coming to know, make me feel genuinely alive."

This is from Carson's first book, *Eros the Bittersweet,* a scholarly and poetic meditation on Greek love poetry distilled from her doctoral thesis in classics.

Autobiography of Red, Anne Carson. Knopf, 1998. $23 (hardcover).

Eros the Bittersweet, Anne Carson. Princeton University Press, 1986. Reprinted by Dalkey Archive Press, 1998. $12.95 (paperback).

(*Eros,* published in 1986 and once difficult to find, has been reprinted in paperback by Dalkey Archive Press.) The next installments in this erotic investigation came in two books published in 1995, *Plainwater* and *Glass, Irony, and God.* From these collections I would single out two long poems or essay/poems, "The Anthropology of Water" and "The Glass Essay," for their autobiographical contributions. These pieces shift from a more general longing for romantic experience to recording the effects of abandonment on desire. *Autobiography of Red* is their direct descendent. All offer gorgeous insight into the consuming ache of heartbreak.

Carson's books (and poems) are hybrids of poetic and critical forms. The longest section in *Autobiography of Red,* a "Romance," is sandwiched by the scholarly trappings of Essay, translated Fragments, Appendices, and Interview, all dealing with the Greek poet Stesichoros ("He came after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet"). Stesichoros was the author of a long lyric poem about the mythical Greek monster Geryon, who was red and had wings (and perhaps had six arms and legs), and was killed by Herakles in the tenth of his labors.

Carson's translation of Stesichoros is very free, using modern images like the coil of a hot plate and a glass-bottomed boat, a whimsy that mixes well with the poems' whimsical hardcore redness. Everything here—the cattle, the breeze, the dog—is red. And the monsters are real. Who could love a red winged monster? Who would pick him up in a bar and bring him home? Well, a centaur! Of course. Makes sense. I admired Stesichoros's relentlessness.

The "Romance" section of the novel follows the life of Geryon (still with wings, but in a contemporary setting) from kindergarten to his early twenties. Here also Geryon meets Herakles, late at night in a train station, when Geryon is fourteen and Herakles sixteen. It is love at first sight. Herakles seduces Geryon, then abandons him. "Geryon you know we'll always be friends," says Herakles, but Geryon for years after lives life as "a brokenheart."

> His brain was jerking forward like a bad slide projector. He saw the doorway the house the night the world and
> on the other side of the world somewhere Herakles laughing drinking getting into a car and Geryon's
> whole body formed one arch of a cry—upcast to that custom, the human custom of wrong love.

Is Carson's Geryon really a red monster? Is the reader meant to think the wings, the redness, are literally there? The answer is, yes, sometimes; and no. For the most part, it seems that Geryon is not literally red (that is, no one ever mentions it, though he frequently thinks it to himself); but the wings are sometimes meant to be real. They are a nuisance, Geryon is always stuffing them into large jackets. But in some of the scenes where they seem most crucial, they are missing. The most peculiar absence is in Geryon's affair with Herakles. Late in the book there is a description of Geryon and Herakles in bed:

> When they made love
> Geryon liked to touch in slow succession each of the bones of Herakles' back
> as it arched away from him into
> who knows what dark dream of its own, running both hands all the way down
> from the base of the neck
> to the end of the spine which he can cause to shiver like a root in the rain.

And what does Herakles think of Geryon's back, with its wings powerful enough to fly? When Geryon is alone, we see "the fantastic fingerwork of his wings . . . outspread on the bed like a black lace/ map of South America." But when Herakles is around, the wings are never mentioned. There is no description of how Herakles reacted learning of them, of how he touched them when they made love. Geryon never uses them to entice Herakles: a lover who can fly! Surely Herakles would take notice. Who wouldn't? So the reader begins to wonder, are the wings really there? Maybe this is all metaphor. But another character, Herakles's companion Ancash, sees the wings, and his reaction is completely realistic, and it all seems very literal.

This is an odd thing. What is going on?, I kept wondering. Are "red" and "wings" merely words here? In fact the wings mostly showed up when they made a good image, an imaginative line. And there are plausible metaphorical readings: that they stand for Geryon's difference from other people, his extreme sensitivity and creative nature. Geryon becomes a photographer, and there is certainly a sense here of art being a way to redeem pain. One might also say that the people who see and react to Geryon's wings—his mother, and later, Ancash—are the people who understand Geryon, who can see what he really is, where Herakles—physical, restless, focused on sex, as energetic as Geryon is passive—certainly does not.

This all makes sense. And yet, I found myself fighting the metaphors. It is not that I object to there being metaphorical substance. But the balance between literal and metaphorical readings didn't seem right. I wanted the wings (and the whole "monster" premise) to play a less passive role, and affect the book's narrative events. Geryon could have done everything he does here (except fly, once), without them. Look what *Red* starts with: a character who is a "monster," and one with mythical origins; wings capable of flight; the scholarly framing, the book's formal beauty. . . . I was disappointed that the narrative didn't go along with this, and take a direction for which those wings were necessary. In my enthusiasm for the premise and Carson's writing I imagined a book like an eagle's aerie built into a cliff face; a place you couldn't get to any other way.

Well, it is no small thing to get a glimpse of a fabulous book that might have been, even if that gets in the way, for a time, of appreciating what there actually is. What there is, is a book that is quieter, more gentle, playful and a bit sulky. *Red* is lovely to read. The "Romance" particularly, with its short sections and rocking lines, is compulsively readable. There are passages throughout with exactly the kind of adventurous imagination I had hoped to find in the narrative structure:

> It was the year he began to wonder about the noise that colors make. Roses came roaring across the garden at him.
> He lay on his bed at night listening to the silver light of stars crashing against the window screen. Most
> of those he interviewed for the science project had to admit they did not hear the cries of the roses
> being burned alive in the noonday sun. Like horses, Geryon would say helpfully, like horses in war. No, they shook their heads.
> Why is grass called blades? he asked them. Isn't it because of the clicking?
> They stared at him. You should be
> interviewing roses not people, said the science teacher. Geryon liked this idea.

Carson's sense of humor is deeply embedded in the writing and shows up everywhere, from the surprise of parrot ticks in a wool blanket, to odd philosophical twists, such as an anti-Zeno's paradox: "A man moves through time. It means nothing except that,/ like a harpoon, once thrown he will arrive." Or, more subtly yet, Geryon thinking to himself *"Time isn't made of anything.*

It is an abstraction" as the scene mysteriously shifts from just past dawn to 3 P.M.

The narrative, though, continued to frustrate me. It often felt as though Carson had simply attached some of her own interests or experiences to the characters. And perhaps this was deliberate. But it had the effect of making the events of *Red* seem quite arbitrary.

After college, Geryon goes to South America. (Why South America? Is it so that he can go from one mythology to another—from the Greeks to the Peruvian Indians, where red winged people are those who have returned from inside the volcano, "all their weaknesses burned away"? Or did Carson travel there herself, and want to describe what she had seen?) In Buenos Aires Geryon runs into Herakles, who is traveling around the world taping the sounds of volcanos for a documentary on Emily Dickinson. (Why is Herakles so interested in Emily Dickinson? Are we supposed to believe that he really is interested, or just enjoy the reference to Dickinson?) There is a convention of philosophers in the middle of the book. (Why? So that there can be a lecture on emotionlessness, an "erotics of doubt"?)

So many questions; perhaps the interview at the end will answer some of them?

I: How about your little hero Geryon
S[tesichoros]: Exactly it is red that I like and there is a link between geology and character
I: What is this link
S: I have often wondered

It was frustration that lead me to reread two of Carson's earlier works: *Eros the Bittersweet,* and the long essay/poem "The Anthropology of Water," from *Plainwater.* Frustration has its rewards. The character and sensibility of Geryon had reminded me throughout *Autobiography of Red* of Carson's (autobiographical) narrator in "Water." They share a sense of being outsiders who feel the insides of things; at once skeptical observers and fierce experiencers. So that words, and feelings, bump against each other. Nouns, verbs, and adjectives migrate. Even when they keep their proper places in a sentence, you can feel them turning into each other. (As Carson says in *Eros the Bittersweet:* "properly a noun, eros acts everywhere like a verb.") In a way, this similarity makes Geryon less convincing a monster. What had seemed most alien about his

perceptions (in passages such as the screaming roses) turns out to be true of Carson's, too: "Sky so blue it comes off on your eyes. I see shadows in the process of being sucked back into the light."

The parallels between "Water" and *Red* extend to form, language, even a sequence of photographs. Here Carson "photographs" El Cid and his lover Ximena, buried together in Burgos Cathedral:

> My heart gets dizzy. It is the most difficult photograph I have tried to take so far: up the scaffolding, hand over hand and out onto the pinnacles they blow, her hair like a red sail as they veer around storks' nests in the wind and clutch wide at the railings, leaning out over the tiny city, its clockwork shadows so crazily far below. . . . She kisses him on the shoulder in the Moorish custom. They look at one another. They look into the light. They jump.

In *Red,* Carson has Geryon take such photographs. And she gives him her heartbreak. Reading Geryon's heartbreak as an extension of Carson's gave it far greater impact, for me; perhaps because that weight of loss seemed to belong to someone older, not to a boy of fourteen.

More could be said about the similarities of *Plainwater,* as a collection, and *Red,* which were assembled from many of the same ingredients. I will only mention here that "Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings" has the same structure of essay, fragments, and interview as *Red*'s sections on Stesichoros; and the conference of phenomenologists in "Canicula di Anna" gets transformed into *Red*'s philosophy conference (none of which discourages my inclination to see Geryon as Carson with wings).

Then there is *Eros the Bittersweet* providing the theoretical commentary—"We are not lovers who can both feel and attain their desires"—Carson's long fascination with the ache of erotic desire, with pleasure/pain made exquisite in lyric poetry, with *how words feel.* Reading one and then another they tumbled together: the erotic possibilities of language, the way love stories played out in Carson's life, the way she shifted the aches to fiction, red with wings. They formed a sort of trilogy of erotic sufferings.

"What does the lover want from love?" "What does the reader want from reading? What is the writer's desire?" *Eros the Bittersweet* takes for its subject the links between eros and the written word, generally; and in particular, the

way poets use language to describe the feeling of falling in love. The poems and the language most closely analyzed are early Greek (Sappho, Archilochos, Anakreon), what Carson calls "the first outbreak of literary activity that followed the alphabet." These poets were the first to write about love; they were the first to use written language at all. It was newly invented.

One effect of this newness was that the unit of poetic line was no longer the stock image, easily memorized, but the individual word. This notion comes up also in *Red,* in the opening essay on Stesichoros, whose importance, Carson says, was making adjectives: "Homer's epithets are a fixed diction with which Homer fastens every substance in the world to its aptest attribute and holds them in place for epic consumption." When Stesichoros began to attach different adjectives to nouns, "Stesichoros released being. All the substances in the world went floating up. Suddenly there was nothing to interfere with horses being *hollow-hooved.* . . . Or a planet *middle night struck.* Or an insomniac *outside the joy."*

Language is approached throughout the book as a thing that we shape, and that shapes us. There are the psychological effects of reading, of blocking out the external world to more fully experience an imagined one; the impact of the invention of the consonant, the concept of words having edges and boundaries. There are the ways language frames the paradoxes of erotic feeling, showing how we are spun around by wanting, and not wanting, love to take possession of us. In a fragment from Anakreon: "I'm in love! I'm not in love!/ I'm crazy! I'm not crazy!"

My title "erotic sufferings" is taken from the chapter "A Novel Sense." "Erotic sufferings" were an early form of romance novel, "love stories in which it is generically required that love be painful." The writer gives the reader both pain and pleasure by providing a series of obstacles to the lovers' union. But the lovers always come together at the end, and the reader knows this, and enjoys the tease. "As readers we know the novel must end and want it to end. 'But not yet!' say the readers to the writer. 'But not yet!' says the writer to his hero and heroine. 'But not yet!' says the beloved to the lover. And so the reach of desire continues."

Which brings us to "The Anthropology of Water," still my favorite of Carson's works: "Water is something you cannot hold. Like men. I have tried. Father, brother, lover, true friends, hungry ghosts and God, one by one all took themselves out of my hands."

I liked this best of all the pieces in *Plainwater* when I read it several years ago. Was it as good, on rereading, as I remembered? Yes; better. In fact it was stunning. Why did it seem even better now? This was particularly true of the section "Just for the Thrill: An Essay on the Difference Between Men and Women," which is an account of Carson and her lover driving cross country. I was halfway through before I realized Carson had not yet told the reader that she and her lover will part for good when they reach L.A. That is why it matters so much that she remember every little thing ("Every little thing the entire truth"), and why she asks so many questions about what love means to him; why she is studying "the difference between men and women." It is not until their last night of driving that she says: "Well enlightenment is useless but I do not like the fact that a shot has a target. We are driving to Los Angeles because he wants to live there. When the ritual is over, campers go their separate ways."

Often, in a review, one does not want to mention developments of this sort, for fear of robbing a plot of suspense. But in this case it changes the reading completely to know the source of Carson's frustration throughout the drive. She isn't just being difficult; her heart is breaking. In the light of approaching separation, each snatch of song lyric or "ancient Chinese wisdom" gives sad council, and the scenery aches. It is abandonment that loads each sentence with grief, and it seems like the reader ought to know this. Otherwise one must read the essay twice; and while I would recommend that too, most people will not.

I am neglecting the other sections of "The Anthropology of Water" for the purposes of this review. But all of it is gorgeous. The three sections share a structure of journal entries: days of walking; driving; swimming. The last section, "Water Margins: An Essay on Swimming by My Brother," is dedicated to Carson's brother, who left home when he was seventeen, for three years sent postcards from Europe and Asia, then disappeared. The section feels haunted. The days pass in hypnotic suspension—swimming, not swimming; water and weather, watching, waiting:

> In the late afternoon the lake is shaded. There is the sudden luxury of the places where the cold springs come flooding up around the swimmer's body from below like an opening dark green geranium of ice. Marble hands drift enormously in front of his face. He watches them move past him into the lower water

where red stalks float in dust. A sudden thin shaft of fish smell. No sleep here, the swimmer thinks as he shoots along through the utterly silent razor-glass dimness. One drop of water entirely awake.

Dive in. Hold your breath.

Plainwater is currently out of print, but Vintage plans to publish a paperback edition sometime in 1999.